

## Majjhima Nikāya 38

# MAHĀTANHĀSAÑKHAYASUTTA

## The Great Deliverance from Emotions

( Ven. Dr. M. Punnaaji Mahathera )

Thus have I heard:

Once when the Blessed One was in Savatthi at Anathapindika's Park, of Jeta's grove, a **pernicious view** had arisen in a bhikkhu named Sarthy, who was the son of a fisherman. His View was that: "It is the **consciousness** that passes from one life to another in the round of rebirths called *Samsara*."

It is important to note that this view of Sarthy is similar to **reincarnation** or **transmigration**, where a "soul" passes from one life to another. The "soul" is believed to be something permanent, which remains after the death of the body. When a human being is born, God is supposed to instill a soul into the body. This is called "incarnation." When the body of a person dies, the soul is supposed to come out of the body, which is called "discarnation." This discarnate soul that is without a body is supposed to re-enter a body at rebirth. This is called reincarnation. The term "transmigration" carries the same meaning, where a soul migrates from one life to another.

It is important to understand that in this Sutta the Buddha points out that the idea of rebirth, in Buddhism is not the transmigration of a soul or a reincarnation, even though writers use these terms through their ignorance. Rebirth is not the continuity of a permanent soul from one life to another. It is not the continuity of an entity but the continuity of an activity. There is no static entity in life to be called a soul. There is only a dynamic activity like a flame, which continues from life to life. This is why it is wrong to call life an "existence" because existence is a static concept. Life is a dynamic process of activity that continues from birth to death and even beyond, similar to a flame, which can also be stopped like blowing out a flame, or the flame can stop due to lack of fuel.

Some bhikkhus who had heard this attempted to detach him from this pernicious view: "Friend Sarthy, in many ways the Blessed One has stated, consciousness arises dependent on conditions. Consciousness cannot arise without a condition for it's arising."

Although pressed by those bhikkhus, Sarthy continued to remain in that pernicious view.

So the bhikkhus went to the Blessed One, and the Blessed One called for the bhikkhu Sarthy. Then the Bhikkhu Sarthy came to the Blessed One, and the Blessed One asked him whether he harboured this view, and Bhikkhu Sarthy admitted, yes.

Then the Blessed One asked him to explain the nature of that consciousness?

He replied that it was the consciousness that thinks, speaks, feels, and experiences the result of good and bad actions.

Then the Blessed One said: “ Misguided man, have you ever heard me teach the Dhamma that way? Have I not stated in many ways that consciousness arises dependent on conditions. Consciousness cannot arise without the presence of the necessary conditions.

It is important to understand the difference in the way of thinking between: Bhikkhu Sarthy and the Buddha.

1. For Sarthy “consciousness” is the “self” that speaks, feels, and thinks.
2. For the Buddha “consciousness” is the “process of perception” that depends on the conditions: eye, ear, nose tongue and body.

Here we are talking about two kinds of thinking:

- (1) Existential thinking of Sarti, and
- (2) Experiential thinking of the Buddha.

The Buddha is a person who has awakened from the dream of existence. He is trying to awaken the disciple.

The Buddha was trying to draw attention to an important fact that modern scientists discovered only recently, somewhere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which is the basis of all modern scientific technology. It is the law of nature called **determinism**. It means that every natural occurrence is determined by the presence of the necessary conditions. The Buddha pointed this out more than twenty-five centuries earlier. He called it *paticca samuppāda*, which he defined as: “When conditions are present it comes into being; when conditions are absent it ceases to be.” *hetun paticca sambhutan; hetu bhanga nirujjati*. This means everything that happens in nature happens only due to the presence of the necessary conditions.

This means natural occurrences are not due to the work of supernatural beings, but due to the presence of the necessary conditions. In other words, every thing that happens in nature is dependent on conditions. When the intelligentsia of the Western civilization comprehended this fact, they lost faith in the religious dogmas. That was how science began to take the place of religion. Humanism was substituted for theism. This period of revolution in human thinking began to be called the Age of Enlightenment.

It is important to understand that Buddhism is not an atheistic philosophy but a humanistic religion. It is useful to know that the Buddha did not use his knowledge to conquer nature as Modern science does. He used it to conquer the mind that goes against reality and produces suffering. Our problem is that our emotions are coming in conflict with reality. Therefore modern science makes an effort to change reality to suit our desires. The effort of the Buddha, however, was to change our mind to suit reality, instead. Reality cannot be changed through technology. Only by changing our mind can the problem be solved. This is the meaning of meditation.

Bhikkhus, does doubt arise when one is uncertain?

Yes Lord it is so.

Is doubt abandoned in one who comprehends?

Yes Lord it is so.

Having comprehended it do you hold on to it dogmatically?

No lord.

You then understand that the dhamma is similar to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, and not for clinging to it dogmatically.

Yes Lord.

There are these four kinds of sustenance, for the preservation of life for those who are already living, and for those who seek a living. They are:

1. Palpable food (*kabalinkara ahara*)
2. Food in the form of cognition (*passa ahara*)

3. Food in the form of emotion and reason (*mano sancetana ahara*)
4. Food in the form of consciousness (*viññāna*)

it is important to realize that the Buddha did not speak of an existing “personality” or “self” that is reborn. He only spoke about the experience of a living organism and how it was maintained depending on conditions. From there on he got into a discussion of the Concurrence of Antecedents (*paticca samuppāda*). This means the *paticca samuppāda* is not a description of how rebirth takes place in three lives, but a description of how an experience arises and how it passes away, irrespective of time. In other words it is not based on existential thinking, but on experiential thinking.

What condition being present do these four kinds of sustenance come into being?

**Emotional Reaction to feelings** (*tanha*) is the condition when present these Four kinds of sustenance come into being.

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What condition being present does the **emotional reaction to feelings** (*tanha*) come into being?

**Feeling** (*vedana*) being present the **emotional reaction** (*tanha*) comes into being.

What being present does **feeling** (*vedana*) arise?

**Cognition** (*passa*) being present **feeling** (*vedana*) arises.

What being present does **cognition** (*passa*) arise?

The **six sense experiences** (*salayatana*) being present **cognition** (*passa*) arises?

What being present does the **six sense experiences** (*salayatana*) come into being?

**Named mental images** (*nama rupa*) being present the **six sense experiences** (*salayatana*) come into being.

What being present does **named mental images** (*nama rupa*) come into being?

**Perception** (*viññāna*) being present the **named mental images** (*nama rupa*) comes into being.

What being present does **perception** (*viññāna*) come into being?

**Construction** (*sankārā*) being present **perception** (*viññāna*) comes into being.

What being present does **construction** (*sankārā*) come into being?

**Knowledge being absent** (*avijja*) **construction** (*sankārā*) comes into being.

From here on the Buddha goes through the twelve links of the *paticca samuppāda* both in the ascending as well as the descending order ending up with: “It is in this way that the entire mass of suffering comes into being, and ceases to be.” Having done this he starts again as follows:

Having understood this, oh Bhikkhus, would you run back to the past and question about the past?

No Lord.

Then would you run to the future and question about the future?

No Lord.

Then would you question the present thus: “Am I existing now? Where did I come from? Where will I go from here?”

No Lord.

Here the Buddha begins to make the disciples drop out of time. It is the concept of time in the form of past, present, and future that makes one feel one exists. Existence is the feeling of being in the past, present, and future. Therefore my existence is a feeling of being in time. However, the past does not exist, it has finished; the future does not exist, it has not come; the present is becoming the past every fraction of a second. If the past present and future are absent, what is existence? Existence is a delusion. Existence is only a feeling. Is life only a feeling? Do I really exist? If I do not exist, can I die? Is death a feeling or an absence of feeling? Therefore is death something to worry about?

Having comprehended this would you state: “I believe this out of respect for my teacher?

No Lord

Having comprehended this would you seek another teacher?

No Lord

Having comprehended this would you dogmatically get into arguments and debates with others?

No Lord

Will you be speaking only about what you have seen and understood for yourselves?

Yes Lord.

Good, Bhikkhus, you have been guided by this Dhamma, which is well enunciated, visible here and now, independent of time, verifiable, introspective, and to be personally experienced by the intelligent.

Having brought the disciples into the correct perspective, the Buddha begins to speak about how a rebirth takes place.

Bhikkhus, conception takes place dependent on three conditions:

1. Union of parents
2. Mother being fertile
3. Agent seeking rebirth

After conception the mother carries the embryo for nine months or then and the child is born.

When the child grows up the child begins to play games.

When he grows up and his faculties mature the youth enjoys with the five sensual pleasures. On seeing forms with the eye, and hearing sounds with the ears, he lusts after them, personalizes them, and comes into existence, resulting in birth, aging and death and all the consequent suffering.

Then a Tathagata arises in the world. He describes the nature of the world and speaks about the dhamma pleasant in the beginning middle and end, and reveals the holy life. Having heard the dhamma he abandons the sensual life and begins to discipline himself.

He begins to become one who acts in full awareness. He abandons the five hindrances and enters and abides in the first, second, third, and fourth jhana.

He learns to remain unaffected by feelings pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. He stops personalizing subjective experiences, and the body, and ceases to exist as a “self.” Thus he gains freedom from birth, aging, and death, and the entire mass of suffering.

Remember this as the Great Deliverance from the **Emotional Reaction** (*tanha*), which is **the root of all Suffering**. Remember also how Bhikkhu Sarthy had misunderstood the Dhamma.

The Bhikkhus were pleased to hear what the Buddha said.

It is important to understand that this Sutta clearly explains the true nature of the *paticca samuppāda*. It is not the explanation of karma and rebirth of an “existing self,” but about the arising and ceasing of an “impersonal experience” that creates the delusion of existence due to the personalization of the impersonal subjective experience, resulting in suffering. It also shows how suffering comes to an end when both subjective and the objective experiences are depersonalized.